

FANNIE LOU HAMER, ROSA PARKS, AND CORETTA SCOTT KING VOTING RIGHTS ACT REAUTHORIZATION AND AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2006

SPEECH OF

**HON. K. MICHAEL CONAWAY**

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Thursday, July 13, 2006*

The House in Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union had under consideration the bill (H.R. 9) to amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965:

Mr. CONAWAY. Mr. Chairman, after careful and thoughtful consideration, I could not in good conscience vote in support of H.R. 9, the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). The 1965 VRA successfully protected minority voters from disenfranchisement and strengthened our democracy. I support that law and realize its valuable contributions to our society.

Every citizen of this great Nation, regardless of race, should have the opportunity to cast their vote without fear of threats or discrimination. The VRA was a good idea and necessary in 1965, however, times have changed drastically since it was originally enacted more than 40 years ago.

During the debate, a good friend of mine, Rep. ROSCOE BARTLETT of Maryland, made the comment: "When you get sick, you go to the doctor and you get a prescription. Once you get well you stop taking the medicine." The provisions of the Voting Rights Act we voted on today do not recognize the accomplishments and progress made by covered States since the original VRA was enacted.

Today, the majority of electoral discrimination cases come from outside the jurisdictions that are covered under Section 5. The Voting Rights Act up for debate today should have recognized the many changes and improvements in the American South. Under the bill that passed today, Texas remains one of only eight States subject to this gross infringement on State's rights. Today, Texas is one of the most diverse States in the entire Nation with thriving minority communities throughout the state.

Not only do the reauthorized provisions in the VRA not take into account the progress that has been made, these provisions will be used as an unfunded mandate on southern States for the next 25 years. Legislation created in 1965 to fix a problem of that era, will still be in effect in 2032; far too long to pay a penalty for things that happened generations ago.

I support the valuable history and importance of the Voting Rights Act that passed in 1965, but the discriminatory problems we face today were not addressed or considered in this reauthorization. I support most of the provisions and the spirit of the VRA; however, H.R. 9 does not advance our democracy and keeps in place the taints of previous generations that are no longer deserved.

FANNIE LOU HAMER, ROSA PARKS, AND CORETTA SCOTT KING VOTING RIGHTS ACT REAUTHORIZATION AND AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2006

SPEECH OF

**HON. AL GREEN**

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Thursday, July 13, 2006*

The House in Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union had under consideration the bill (H.R. 9) to amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965:

Mr. AL GREEN of Texas. Mr. Chairman, I rise in support of equality, non-discrimination, and the full participation in our society by all Americans. I rise in support of reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Voting is the most important tool Americans have to influence government policies that affect every aspect of our lives. It affects: the types of schools our children attend, the quality of our health care, the decision whether to send our sons and daughters to fight and die in a foreign land.

The right to vote is the foundation of our democracy. The Voting Rights Act provides the legal basis to protect this right for all Americans.

On the eve of the 41st anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we cannot overstate the impact that this landmark piece of legislation has had on the face of this Nation.

Before passage of the Voting Rights Act we had 300 African-American elected officials. We now have more than 9,100.

Before passage of section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, we had 1,200 Latino elected officials. We now have more than 6,000.

We now have hundreds more Asian-Americans and Native Americans serving as elected officials.

The Voting Rights Act was enacted in response to our Nation's long history of discrimination. But the critical moment leading to the VRA's passage occurred in March 1965 on a bridge outside Selma, AL.

On March 7, 1965, voting rights supporters planned a march from Selma to the State capitol in Montgomery to present then-Governor George Wallace with a list of grievances. They were stopped on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma by State troopers and sheriff's deputies on horseback who, in front of television cameras, attacked the more than 500 demonstrators by firing toxic tear gas, charging the marchers, and beating people with clubs and whips.

Eight days after "Bloody Sunday," President Lyndon Johnson addressed a special joint session of Congress before a national television audience and said that:

Experience has clearly shown that the existing process of law cannot overcome systematic and ingenious discrimination. No law that we now have on the books . . . can ensure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it . . . This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, no hesi-

tation and no compromise with our purpose . . ."

By August 6, 1965, Congress had passed the Voting Rights Act by an overwhelming majority and President Johnson had signed it into law.

The VRA not only abolished literacy and other tests which had been used to deny African Americans and other minorities the right to vote, it also prohibited "covered jurisdictions" from implementing new voting practices without first pre-clearing them with Federal officials.

And when the act was expanded and strengthened in 1975 to include protections for language minorities who had suffered systematic exclusion from the political process, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans and Alaskan Natives also gained new tools to ensure fundamental fairness in the voting process.

Most of the provisions of the VRA are permanent, but some will expire next year if they are not renewed. The expiring sections include:

Section 5, which requires covered jurisdictions to obtain "preclearance" from the Justice Department or the U.S. District Court in DC before they can change voting practices or procedures.

Section 203, which requires election officials to provide written and oral assistance for certain citizens who have limited English proficiency.

Sections 6–9, which authorize the U.S. Attorney General to appoint examiners and send Federal observers to monitor elections when there is evidence to suggest voter intimidation at the polls.

While the days of discrimination in the form of literacy tests and poll taxes may be over, it is clear that voter inequities, disparities, and obstacles still remain for far too many minority voters.

In Harris County, TX, citizens of Vietnamese descent are under the protection of the VRA. Because of this, under the language assistance provisions of the VRA, Harris County is required to:

Provide election information including ballots and registration information in Vietnamese, as well as English and Spanish.

Ensure that there are adequate bilingual poll workers to meet the needs of the language minority communities.

In 2003, Harris County election officials failed to comply with this law.

Pressure from the Asian American Legal Center of Texas, the Asian American Justice Center, and the Justice Department resulted in an agreement whereby the county agreed to ensure compliance with the language provisions of the VRA in the future.

As a result of these changes, in the November 2004 election, Hubert Vo became the first Vietnamese candidate ever to win a seat on the Texas Legislature.

Mr. Chairman, everyone's right to vote is at risk when anyone's right to vote is denied. The Voting Rights Act is good for minorities and great for America.